

Resolving Disputes - Acts 15:12-21 – May 4th, 2008

- Here in chapter 15, we sort of join a church conference already in progress, in Jerusalem, where Paul and Barnabas have traveled to.
- This Jerusalem conference, or counsel as it's called, was arranged for the purpose of resolving a dispute about the Gentiles salvation.

- The first speaker at this conference was Peter, who tells these "Judaizer's" that the Gentiles don't have to be circumcised to be saved.
- Next to speak will be Barnabas, Paul, and then James will be the final speaker, who makes the final decision as to what they should do.
- The future of Christianity hangs in the balance because these men are at odds with each other and need to resolve this dispute.

- This reminds me of a story that is told of two men who were at odds with each other over a dispute in the past that never got resolved.
- **(George Bernard Shaw to Winston Churchill)** "I am enclosing two tickets to the first night of my play; bring a friend, if you have one."
- **(Winston Churchill, in response)** "Cannot possibly attend first night, will attend second, if there is one."

- We have, in the text before us this morning, a template of sorts, with which to better understand how it's possible to resolve disputes.
- I would like to approach this passage by presenting some questions that we can all ask ourselves when we find ourselves in a dispute.

1. Is it established by two or more? (Verses 12-14)

12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to **Barnabas and Paul** telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. 13 When they finished, **James** spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. 14 **Simon** has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. v12 The whole assembly becomes silent and listens to Barnabas and Paul tell about miracles God did through them among the Gentiles. v13 When they finish, James, the half brother of Jesus, is the fourth one to speak about whether or not Gentiles should be circumcised. v14 James refers to Peter's Jewish name "Simon" and concurs with him regarding God caring about and being accepting of the Gentiles.

"...every word of it was a confirmation of the argument of Peter, that salvation was by grace, not works."

John Phillips, "Exploring Acts," Volume 2, p294

"This is the vital doctrine of Christianity – salvation by grace, and that grace revealed in our crucified Lord. Luther says, 'We must not yield nor give up this article though heaven and earth should perish.' Peter's short and telling speech was a noble contribution to the Gentile cause."

Charles Spurgeon

Matthew 18:15-20 15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, **so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'** 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For **where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.**" NIV

2 Corinthians 13:1 This will be my third visit to you. **"Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."** NIV

"When one man calls you a donkey, pay no attention, but when two men call you a donkey, go get a saddle!" Source Unknown

2. Is God's Word in agreement with it? (Verses 15-18)

15 **The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:** 16 "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' 18 that have been known for ages. v15 James goes on to say that the words that were written by the prophets are in agreement with everything they were saying. v16 He quotes Amos 9:11-12 which refers to the end of the tribulation when the Jewish nation is restored and comes to salvation. v17-18 James says the scriptures teach that God's attention is now focused on the church which is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. - James the Just, as he's called, doesn't support this because the scriptures don't contradict it, but because the scriptures clearly teach it.

"Councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with Scripture." (Stott)

Ezekiel 44:24a "In any dispute, the priests are to serve as judges and decide it according to my ordinances. NIV

3. Will it stumble others? (Verses 19-21)

19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 **Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain** from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21 For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

v19 James concludes by making the judgment that they should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to the Lord. v20 He then suggests they write and tell them to abstain from certain things for the sake of morality, and sensitivity, to not stumble Jews. v21 He refers to Moses as if to say you don't become a Jew to be a Christian, but you don't forsake the Law of Moses to be a Christian

1 Corinthians 8:9-13 9 Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? 11 So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12 When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. NIV

"All four of the requested abstentions related to ceremonial laws laid down in Leviticus 17 and 18, and three of them concerned dietary matters which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile common meals." John Stott

- James resolved this dispute with a Godly wisdom by making the decision that was Biblically correct, and considerate of both parties.
- James was in a position of authority and could rightfully pass judgment on the matter as the "Senior Pastor" of the Jerusalem church.

"The rest either *argued* on the subject, or gave their *opinion*; James alone pronounced the *definitive sentence*." Adam Clarke

"Thus James summed up the evidence, and the brethren saw their way clear to a decision which was hearty and unanimous. ... Oh, that all disputes among Christians could be settled in such a manner!" Charles Spurgeon